

# Teaching for Social Justice

## One teacher's journey

By Bob Peterson

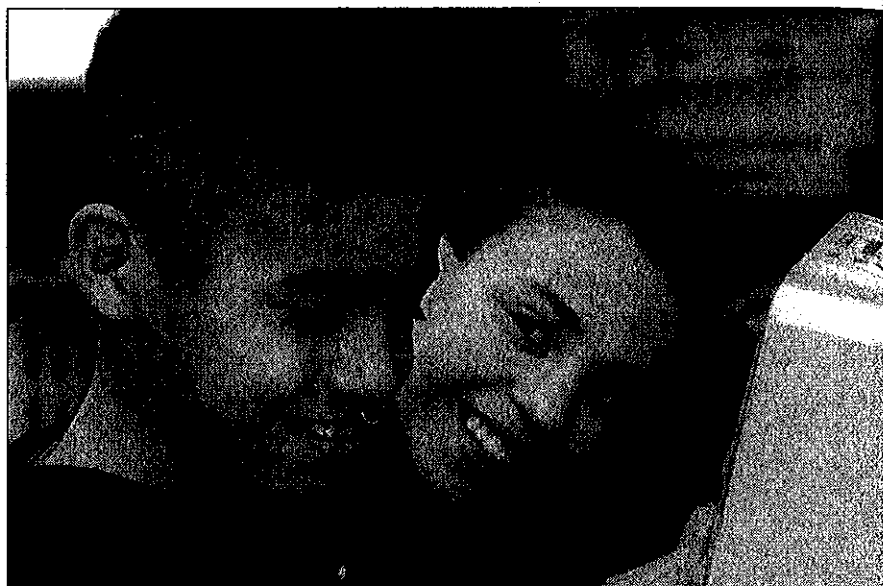
It's November and a student brings in a flier about a canned food drive during the upcoming holiday season. The traditional teacher affirms the student's interest—"That's nice and I'm glad you care about other people"—but doesn't view the food drive as a potential classroom activity.

The progressive teacher sees the food drive as an opportunity to build on students' seemingly innate sympathy for the downtrodden, and, after a class discussion, has children bring in cans of food. They count them, categorize them, and write about how they feel.

The critical teacher does the same as the progressive teacher—but more. The teacher also uses the food drive as the basis for a discussion about poverty and hunger. How much poverty and hunger is there in our neighborhood? Our country? Our world? Why is there poverty and hunger? What is the role of the government in making sure people have enough to eat? Why isn't it doing more? What can we do in addition to giving some food?

Participating in a food drive isn't the litmus test of whether one is a critical teacher. But engaging children in reflective dialogue is.

Unfortunately, a lack of reflective dialogue is all too common in American schools. Less than 1 percent of instructional time in high school is devoted to discussion that requires reasoning or an opinion from students, according to researcher John Goodlad in his study of American schooling. A similar



Students in Bob Peterson's class at La Escuela Fratney.

atmosphere dominates many elementary classrooms, where worksheets and mindless tasks fill up children's time.

Divisions between traditional, progressive, and critical teaching are often artificial and many teachers use techniques common to all three. As I attempt to improve my teaching and build what I call a "social justice classroom," however, I have found it essential to draw less on traditional methods and more on the other two.

What follows is an outline of lessons that I have learned as I have tried, sometimes more successfully than others, to incorporate my goal of critical/social justice teaching into my classroom practice over the past 25 years.

There are five characteristics that I think are essential to a critical/social justice classroom:

- A curriculum grounded in the lives of our students.
- Dialogue.
- A questioning / problem-posing approach.
- An emphasis on critiquing bias and attitudes.
- The teaching of activism for social justice.

A well organized class based on collaboration and student participation is a prerequisite for such a program. I'd also like to add that such "characteristics" are actually goals—never quite reached by even the best teachers, but always sought by all good teachers.

### Curriculum Grounded in the Lives of Our Students

A teacher cannot build a community of learners unless the lives of the students

are an integral part of the curriculum. Children, of course, talk about their lives constantly. The challenge is for teachers to make connections between what the students talk about and the curriculum and broader society.

I start the year with a six-week unit on the children's families and backgrounds. To begin the unit I have students place their birthdates on the class timeline—which covers nearly 600 years (an inch representing a year), and which runs above the blackboard and stretches around two walls. Students write their names and birthdates on 3x5 cards and tie the cards with yarn to the hole in the timeline that corresponds to their year of birth. On the second day we place their parents' birthdates on the timeline, on the third day those of their grandparents or great-grandparents. Throughout the year, students add dates that come up in our study of history, literature, science, and current events. The timeline provides students with a visual representation of time, history, and sequence, while fostering the understanding that everything is interrelated.

The weekly writing homework assignment during this family background unit consists of children collecting information about their families—how they were named, stories of family trips, favorite jokes, an incident when they were young, a description of their neighborhood. Students share these writings with each other and at times with the whole class. They use these assignments as rough drafts for autobiographies which are eventually bound and published. The assignments also inspire classroom discussion and further study. For example, one of my students, Faviola Perez, wrote a poem about her neighborhood, which led to discussions about violence and what we might do about it. The poem goes:

*My Street at Night*

*My mom says, "Time to go to bed."*

*The streets at night  
are horrible  
I can't sleep!  
Cars are passing  
making noise  
sirens screaming  
people fighting  
suffering!  
Suddenly the noise goes away  
I go to sleep  
I start dreaming  
I dream about people  
shaking hands  
caring  
caring about our planet  
I wake up  
and say  
Will the world be  
like this some day?*

In the discussion that followed, many students shared similar fears and gave examples of how family members or friends had been victims of violence. Others offered ways to prevent violence.

"We shouldn't buy team jackets," said one student.

"The police should keep all the criminals in jail forever," was another suggestion. Needless to say, the students don't have a uniform response, and I use such comments to foster discussion. When necessary or appropriate, I also interject questions that might help the students deepen or reconsider their views. I also try to draw connections between such problems and conflicts that I witness daily in the class. When a student talks about a killing over a mundane argument or a piece of clothing, for instance, I ask how these differ from the conflicts in our school and on our playground, and how we might solve them.

Focusing on problems in writing and discussion acknowledges the seriousness of a child's problem; it also fosters community because the students recognize that we share common con-

cerns. Ultimately, it can help students to re-examine some of their own attitudes that may in fact be a part, albeit small, of the problem.

Throughout the rest of the year I integrate an examination of children's lives and their community into all sections of the curriculum. In reading groups, children relate contemporary and classic children's books to their own lives. For example, I have students divide their paper vertically: On one side they copy an interesting sentence from a book they are reading; on the other side they write how that reminds them of something in their own lives. The students then share and discuss such reflections.

In math we learn percentages, fractions, graphing, and basic math through examining their own lives. For example, my 5th-grade class keeps logs of the time that they spend watching television, graph it, and analyze it in terms of fractions and percentages. As part of our school's nine-week theme called "We Send Messages When We Communicate," they surveyed all the classes in the school to see how many households had various communication equipment, from telephones to computers to VCRs.

Such activities are interesting and worthwhile but not necessarily critical. I thus tried to take the activity a step further—to help them question if watching television is always in their best interests. For instance, we found that some of our students could save over 1,000 hours a year by moderating their TV watching.

"I can't believe I waste so much time watching TV," one girl stated during a discussion.

"You're not wasting it," replied one boy. "You're learning what they want you to buy!" he said sarcastically.

Similar discussions helped children become more conscious of the impact of television and even led a few to

reduce the hours they watched.

One problem, however, that I have encountered in "giving voice" to students is that the voices that dominate are sometimes those of the more aggressive boys or those students who are more academically skilled. I try to overcome this problem by using structures that encourage broader participation. During writing workshop, for example, I give timed "free writes" where children write about anything they want. Afterward they share their writing with another student of their choice. Students then nominate classmates to share with the entire class, which often has the effect of positive peer pressure on those who don't normally participate in class. By hearing their own voices, by having other students listen to what they have to say, children become more self-confident in expressing their own ideas, and feel more a part of the classroom community.

### Dialogue

The basic premise of traditional teaching is that children come to school as empty vessels needing to be filled with information. "Knowledge" is something produced elsewhere, whether by the teacher or the textbook company, and then transferred to the student.

This approach dominates most schools. "Reform" usually means finding more effective ways for children to remember more "stuff" or more efficient ways to measure what "stuff" the students have memorized.

I agree that children need to know bunches of stuff. I cringe any time one of my 5th graders confuses a basic fact like the name of our city or country. But I also know that the vast bulk of stuff memorized by children in school is quickly forgotten, and that the empty vessel premise is largely responsible for the boring, lecture-based instruction that dominates too many classrooms.

The curricular stuff that I want the children to learn will be best remembered if it relates to what they already know, if they have some input into what stuff is actually studied, and if it is studied through activities rather than just listening.

To initiate dialogue I may use a song, poem, story, news article, photo, or cartoon. These dialogue triggers are useful for both classroom and small-group discussion. I often use them as starting points in social studies, writing, or math lessons. I have a song, word, poster, and quotation of the week which, whenever possible, are related to our curriculum topics.

For example, during the study of the American Underground Railroad, I used the song "New Underground Railroad," written by Gerry Tenney and sung by Holly Near and Ronnie Gilbert. The song compares the Underground Railroad in the United States to the movement to save Jews during World War II and to the sanctuary movement to help "illegal" Salvadoran refugees in the 1980s. My student from El Salvador connected immediately to the song. She explained to the class the problems of violence and poverty that her family had faced in El Salvador. This one song raised many more questions, for example: Why did the Nazis kill people? What is anti-Semitism? Who runs El Salvador? Why does the United States send guns to El Salvador? Why are people from El Salvador forced to come to the United States secretly?

Another trigger that I use is overhead transparencies made from provocative newspaper or magazine photographs. For example, for a poetry lesson during writing workshop, I used a *New York Times* photograph taken during a winter cold spell that showed piles of snow-covered blankets and cardboard on park benches near the White House. (See photo, p. 32.) Many students initially thought the piles were trash.

When I told them that they were homeless people who had been snowed upon while asleep, my students were angry. The discussion ranged from their own experiences seeing homeless people in the community to suggestions of what should be done by the president.

"That's not fair," one student responded.

"Clinton said he'd take care of the homeless people if he got elected and look what he's done," said a second student. "Nothing."

"I didn't vote for him," said a third. "Us kids never get to do anything, but I know that if we were in charge of the world we'd do a better job."

"Like what?" I asked.

"Well, on a day that cold he should have opened up the White House and let them in," responded one student. "I were president, that's what I'd do."

One of my students, Jade Williams, later wrote a poem:

### *Homeless*

*I walk to the park  
I see homeless people lying  
on a bench I feel sad  
to see people sleeping outside  
nowhere to go I felt  
to help them let them stay  
in a hotel  
give them things  
until they get  
a job and  
a house to stay  
and let them  
pay me back  
with their love*

### A Questioning/Problem-Posing Approach

Lucy Calkins, director of the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, argues that teachers must allow student viewpoints to be part of the curriculum. "We can't give children rich lives but we can give them the lens to appre-

ciate the richness that is already there in their lives," she writes in her book, *Living Between the Lines*.

But even that approach is not enough. We should also help students to probe the ways their lives are both connected to and limited by society. This is best done if students and teachers jointly pose substantive, challenging questions for the class to try to answer.

Any time a student poses a particularly thoughtful or curious question in my class, we write it down in the spiral notebook labeled "Questions We Have" that hangs on the board in front of the room. Not every question is investigated and thoroughly discussed, but even the posing of the question helps students to consider alternative ways of looking at an issue.

In a reading-group discussion, for example, the question arose of how it must have felt for fugitive slaves and free African Americans to fear walking down the street in the North during the time of slavery. One student said, "I sort of know how they must have felt." Others immediately doubted her statement, but then she explained.

"The slaves, especially fugitive slaves, weren't free because they couldn't walk the streets without fear of the slave masters, but today are we free?" she asked. "Because we can't walk the streets without fear of gangs, violence, crazy people, drunks, and drive-bys."

In reading groups a common assignment is to pose questions from the literature that we read. For example, while reading *Sidewalk Story* by Sharon Bell Mathis, a children's novel in which the main protagonist, a young girl, struggles to keep her best friend from being evicted, my students posed questions about the ethics of eviction, failure to pay rent, homelessness, discrimination, and the value of material possessions over friendship.

"Is it better to have friends or money?" a student asked, which formed

the basis of a lengthy discussion.

Other questions that students have raised in our "Questions We Have" book include: Who tells the television what to put on? Why do geese fly together in an angle? Did ministers or priests have slaves? How many presidents owned slaves? Why haven't we had a woman president? How do horses sweat? If we are free, why do we have to come to school? When did photography start? Who invented slavery? Why are people homeless? What runs faster, a cheetah or an ostrich? Did any adults die in the 1913 massacre of 73 children in Calumet County, Michigan? (in reference to the Woody Guthrie song about a tragedy that grew out of a labor struggle).

Some questions are answered by students working together using reference materials in the classroom or school library. (Cheetahs can run up to 65 miles an hour while ostriches run only 40 mph.) Other questions are subjects of group discussion; still others we

from each group reported to the class.

The fascinating thing was not only the information that I found about their lives, but also how it forced children to reflect on what we had been studying in our unit on slavery and the Underground Railroad. When one student said, "Yeah, it's different because masters whipped slaves and my mom doesn't whip me," another student responded by saying, "All masters didn't whip their slaves."

When another student said that their mothers love them and masters didn't love their slaves, another girl gave the example of the slave character Izzie in the movie *Half Free, Half Slave* that we watched, in which Izzie got special privileges because she was the master's girlfriend. Another girl responded that that wasn't an example of love; she was just being used.

In this discussion, students pooled their information and generated their own understanding of history, chal-

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not just things acted upon.

work on in small groups. For example, the question "What is the difference between the master/slave relationship and parent/child relationship?" developed one afternoon when a child complained that his parent wouldn't allow him out in the evening for school story hour. A girl responded that we might as well all be slaves, and a third student posed the question. After a brief group discussion, I had children work in groups of three or four and they continued the debate. They made two lists, one of similarities and one of differences, between the master/slave relationship and the parent/child relationship. They discussed the question in the small groups, then a spokesperson

lending crude generalizations typical of children this age. It was clear to all that the treatment of slaves was unjust. Not so clear was to what extent and how children should be disciplined by their parents. "That's abuse!" one student remarked after hearing about how one child was punished.

"No, it's not. That's how my mom treats me whenever I do something bad," responded another.

While no "answers" were found, the posing of this question by a student, and my facilitating its discussion, added both to kids' understanding of history and to their sense of the complexity of evaluating what is fair and just in contemporary society.



Homeless people sleep under blanket-covered park benches across the street from the White House. Teachers can use news photos such as this to spark discussion about contemporary social issues.

### Emphasis on Critiquing Bias

Raising questions about bias in ideas and materials—from children's books to school texts, fairy tales, news reports, song lyrics, and cartoons—is another key component of a social justice classroom. I tell my 5th graders it's important to examine "the messages that are trying to take over your brain" and that it's up to them to sort out which ones they should believe and which ones promote fairness and justice.

To recognize that different perspectives exist in society is the first step toward critiquing materials and evaluating what perspectives they represent or leave out. Ultimately it helps children see that they, too, can have their own values and perspectives independent of what they last read or heard.

"Whose point of view are we hearing?" I ask.

One poem that is good to initiate such a discussion is Paul Fleischman's dialogue poem, "Honeybees," from *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices*. (See p. 55.) The poem is read by two people, one describing the life of a bee from the

perspective of a worker, and one from the perspective of a queen. Children love to perform the poem and often want to write their own. They begin to understand how to look at things from different perspectives. They also start to identify with certain perspectives.

After hearing the song of the week, "My Country 'Tis of Thy People You're Dying," by Buffy Sainte-Marie, one of my students wrote a dialogue poem between a Native American and a U.S. soldier about smallpox-infected blankets the U.S. government traded for land. In another instance, as part of a class activity when pairs of students were writing dialogue poems between a master and a slave, two girls wrote one between a field slave and a house slave, further deepening the class's understanding about the complexity of slavery. During writing workshop six weeks later, three boys decided to write a "Triple Dialogue Poem" that included the slave, a slave master, and an abolitionist.

Students also need to know that children's books and school textbooks

contain biases and important omissions. I find the concept of "stereotypes" and "omission" important to enhance children's understanding of such biases.

For example, around Thanksgiving time I show my students an excellent filmstrip called "Unlearning Native American Stereotypes" produced by the Council on Interracial Books for Children. It's narrated by Native American children who visit a public library and become outraged at the various stereotypes of Indians in the books. One year after I showed this, my kids seemed particularly angry at what they had learned. They came the next day talking about how their siblings in first grade had come home with construction paper headdresses with feathers. "That's a stereotype," my kids proudly proclaimed. "What did you do about it?" I asked. "I ripped it up," "I slugged him," came the chorus of responses.

After further discussion, they decided there were more productive things they could do than to hit their siblings. They scoured the school library

for books with Indian stereotypes and found few. So they decided to investigate the 1st-grade room. They found a picture of an Indian next to the letter I in the alphabet strip on the wall. They came back excited, declaring that they had "found a stereotype that everybody sees every day!" They decided they wanted to teach the 1st graders about stereotypes. I was skeptical, but agreed, and after much rehearsal they entered the 1st-grade classroom to give their lesson. Returning to my classroom, they expressed frustration that the 1st graders didn't listen as well as they had hoped, but nonetheless thought it had gone well. Later the two students, Paco Resendez and Faviola Alvarez, wrote in our school newspaper:

We have been studying stereotypes of Native Americans. What is a stereotype? It's when somebody says something that's not true about another group of people. For example, it is a stereotype if you think all Indians wear feathers or say "How!" Or if you think that all girls are delicate. Why? Because some girls are strong.

The emphasis on critique is an excellent way to integrate math into social studies. Students, for example, can tally numbers of instances certain people, viewpoints, or groups are presented in a text or in mass media. One year my students compared the times famous women and famous men were mentioned in the 5th-grade history text. One reaction by a number of boys was that men were mentioned far more frequently because women must not have done much throughout history. To help facilitate the discussion, I provided background resources for the students, including biographies of famous women. This not only helped students better understand the nature of "omission," but also generated interest in reading biographies of women.

In another activity I had students tally the number of men and women by occupation as depicted in magazine and/or TV advertisements. By comparing their findings to the population as a whole, various forms of bias were uncovered. Another interesting activity is having students tally the number of biographies in the school library and analyze them by race, gender, and occupation.

One of my favorite activities involves comparing books. I stumbled on this activity one year when my class read a story about inventions in a reading textbook published by Scott Foresman. The story stated that the traffic light was invented by an anonymous policeman. Actually it was invented by the African-American scientist Garrett A. Morgan. I gave my students a short piece from an African-American history book and we compared it with the Scott Foresman book. We talked about

which story we should believe and how one might verify which was accurate. After checking out another book about inventions, the students realized that the school text was wrong.

### **The Teaching of Activism for Social Justice**

The underlying theme in my classroom is that the quest for social justice is a never-ending struggle in our nation and world; that the vast majority of people have benefited from this struggle; that we must understand this struggle; and that we must make decisions about whether to be involved in it.

I weave the various disciplines around this theme. When I read poetry and literature to the children, I often use books that raise issues about social justice and, when possible, in which the protagonists are young people working for social justice. In math, we will look at everything from the distribution of

## **Songs That Promote Justice**

Following are a few of the songs that I use in my classroom.

"Bread and Roses," written by James Oppenheim, sung by Judy Collins.

"Dear Mr. President," Pink and the Indigo Girls.

"Deportee," Woody Guthrie.

"Don't Laugh at Me," Peter, Paul and Mary.

"Family Tree," Tom Chapin.

"1492," Nancy Schimmel.

"Garbage!" written by Bill Steele, sung by Pete Seeger.

"Have You Been to Jail for Justice," Peter, Paul and Mary.

"If It Were Up to Me," Cheryl Wheeler.

"The Letter," Ruben Blades.

"Lives in the Balance," Jackson Browne.

"Masters of War," Bob Dylan.

"Mr. Wendal," Arrested Development.

"My Country 'Tis of Thy People You're Dying," Buffy Sainte-Marie.

"New Underground Railroad," written by Gerry Tenney, sung by Holly Near and Ronnie Gilbert.

"1913 Massacre," written by Woody Guthrie, sung by Jack Elliott.

"Not in My Name," John McCutcheon.

"Sister Rosa," The Neville Brothers.

"There But for Fortune," Phil Ochs.

"Unite Children," The Children of Selma.

"Wearing of the Green," traditional Irish.

"Why?" Tracy Chapman.

"You Can Get It If You Really Want," Jimmy Cliff.

"Young and Positive," Sweet Honey in the Rock.



wealth in the world to the percentage of women in different occupations. The class songs and posters of the week also emphasize social struggles from around the world. I also have each student make what I call a "people's textbook"—a three-ring binder in which they put handouts and some of their own work, particularly interviews that they conducted. There are sections for geography, history, current events, songs, poetry, and mass media. I also have a gallery of freedom fighters on the wall—posters of people we have studied.

In addition to studying movements for social justice of the past, students discuss current problems and possible solutions. One way I do this is by having students role-play examples of discrimination and how they might respond.

I start with kids dramatizing historical incidents such as Sojourner Truth's successful attempt to integrate street cars in Washington, D.C., after the Civil War, and Rosa Parks' role in the Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott. We brainstorm contemporary problems where people might face discrimination, drawing on our current events studies and interviews children have done with family members and friends.

One day in the spring of 1993, my class was dramatizing contemporary examples. Working in small groups, the students were to choose a type of discrimination—such as not being allowed to rent a house because one receives welfare, or not getting a job because one is a woman—and develop a short dramatization. Afterward, the kids would lead a discussion about the type of discrimination they were acting out.

After a few dramatizations, it was Gilberto, Juan, and Carlos' turn. It was a housing discrimination example—but with a twist. Gilberto and Juan were acting the part of two gay men attempting to rent an apartment, and Carlos was the landlord who refused to rent to them. I was surprised, in part

because in previous brainstorming sessions on discrimination none of my students had mentioned discrimination against gay people. Further, as is often the case with 5th graders, in the past my students had shown they were prone to uncritically accept anti-gay slurs and stereotypes. But here were Gilberto, Juan, and Carlos transferring our class discussion of housing discrimination based on race to that of sexual orientation.

The dramatization caused an initial chorus of laughs and jeers. But the students also listened attentively. Afterward, I asked the class what type of discrimination had been modeled.

"Gayism," one student, Elvis, yelled.

It was a new word to me, but it got the point across. The class then went on to discuss "gayism." Most of the kids agreed that it was a form of discrimination. During the discussion, one student mentioned a gay rights march on Washington a week earlier. (Interestingly, Gilberto, Juan, and Carlos said they were unaware of the march.)

Elvis, who coined the term "gayism," then said: "Yeah, my cousin is one of those lesi... les..."

"Lesbians," I said.

"Yeah, lesbian," he said. He then added enthusiastically: "And she went to Washington to march for her rights."

"That's just like when Dr. King made his dream speech at the march in Washington," another student added.

Before long the class moved on to a new role play. But the "gayism" dramatization lingered in my memory.

One reason is that I was pleased that the class had been able to move beyond the typical discussions around gay issues—which had in the past seemed to center on my explaining why students shouldn't call each other "fag-got." More fundamentally, however, the incident reminded me of the link between the classroom and society, not

only in terms of how society influences the children who are in our classrooms, but also in terms of how reform movements affect daily classroom life.

It's important not only to study these progressive social movements and to dramatize current social problems, but to encourage students to take thoughtful action. By doing this they see themselves as actors in the world, not just things to be acted upon.

One of the best ways to help students in this area is by example—to expose them to people in the community who are fighting for social justice. I regularly have social activists visit and talk with children in my classes. I also explain the activities that I'm personally involved in as an example of what might be done.

I tell students they can write letters, circulate petitions, and talk to other classes and children about their concerns. My students have gone with me to marches that demanded immigrant rights. Two of my students testified before the City Council, asking that a Jobs With Peace referendum be placed on the ballot. Another time students testified with parents in front of the City Council that special monies should be allocated to rebuild our school playground.

If we neglect to include an activist component in our curricula, we cut students off from the possibility of social change. We model apathy as a response to the world's problems.

Such apathy is not OK. At a time when cynicism and hopelessness increasingly dominate our youth, helping students understand the world and their relationship to it by encouraging social action may be one of the few antidotes. Schools are a prime place where this can take place. Teachers are a key element in it happening. ■

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